

Francesco Bertacchini (Italy)

Clip 1

Introduction and youth

My name is Francesco Bertacchini, I was born in Reggio Emilia on June 24th, 1926. That was a very bad time, we couldn't go anywhere because we were being controlled everywhere we went, it was very nasty. We were friends with this guy called Benito, the son of Benito Foscato, the worst fascist of Zanichelli Street, where we have grown up as kids. So we always had to be very careful about what we were saying because he would go and tell his father who would call us to the headquarters. It was a dog's life, you had to take care whom you were dealing with. One day our friend came home dressed as a fascist. At first he seemed on our side. We could not express our ideas because we knew that he would always agree with us but in the end he always would go to tell his father what we'd said and done. In fact, in the end it turned out that he'd enrolled as a volunteer for the Black Brigade: to us it was a shock because we could have been put to jail. You could not trust a person like that.

Clip 2

Ceasefire

As for the ceasefire, I remember that there was this little wall in front of our house next to the road where we always stopped for a chat. I remember that as they announced these news around 5 p.m., the news that the war was over, my sister screamed at me: "Hey, Francesco, they said on the radio that the war is over but now there will be discussions with the Germans ..." So I went upstairs because in our house I was the only one in possession of a radio, so I went to listen. They said something about the cease-fire with the Americans so the war-thing was expected to be over, but it was starting right in that moment instead, especially for us.

Clip 3

Searching for the partisans

By that time Dante Street, Dalmazia Street and Dante Zanichelli Street became something like an island because everybody went to stay outside the city centre where there were continuous bombings.

One evening I, Armando and Orvillo, the one on the picture, met outside the Ariosto Theatre at 8 o'clock because it was curfew time and then we went here and there. We made friends with the guard of the GIL, who was called Bonacini. Orvillo, our third friend but more a brother to us was working as a driver for the GIL. So we made friends and at night during the curfew we went to the GIL to spend the night, play games, stay with friends and no-one would bother us, despite the fact that it was turning into barracks. In those barracks there were no Black Brigades but Green Flames instead. They called the young fascists a name that I now can't remember.

It were their barracks but they had to let us stay because they knew we were going to Felice's place. He, poor man, was living there as a guard, and nobody ever went there. We were staying there until midnight, then we slowly walked across the river and went home without the fear that a group of fascists would get us.

One day Armando's uncle told us: "Guys, if you want to go and take a look where the rebels stay, I can tell you the way". We were sceptical at the beginning, there were news that the fascists went for a roundup in the mountains, that they had found the rebels, and that they'd done this and that ... We were growing up and getting more upset, we thought we were capable of somehow bothering those fascist. So we decided to go but we always postponed it because the rumours were many but nothing happened. One Sunday we went to Pancio's uncle who told us the way. It was really hard

because he told us to go to Sole di Vetto where a wood-seller was staying. He told us that the road up was safe and free. We could go there and then that guy would introduce us to the rebels. But it was a flop instead because when we reached Compiano, we met a patrol that was checking the road and we had to hide on the other shore of the river. We found ourselves in Scurano and then there we had to give up our plan to go to the mountains. We went for a trip but in the end it wasn't even a trip. It ended up being a terrible mess. When we arrived we had no money, no stuff and no one to help us.

So we left the bicycle there in Compiano and arriving at Buvolo we saw many people sitting on the bridge. We looked at each other and said: "Those are not people, those are soldiers or fascists". In fact one of them jumped up and came to talk to us, but we just turned around without much fuss and walked back to where we were coming from, to Scurano.

When we approached the village, we noticed a lot of people fleeing. So we asked: "What happened?" And they said: "The Germans have come!" Oh, shit! We asked a man standing around which was the safest way and he said: "I am going to the cemetery". So we went there, too. After a while everything was quiet so we walked back home. We didn't know the place so we decided to spend the night there and leave the next morning. Slowly, avoiding the main roads and the villages, we went up to the hills. We reached Nironi, Vairo, Palanzano, all those villages that we'd heard about but had no idea where they were. If we asked people they would all say: "No, here we don't know anything, we don't see anything, we don't even know who the rebels are ..." So slowly, slowly we proceeded uphill and were quite desperate because we had lost ... We had some coins in our pocket but not many. At night there always was a problem of where to spend the night, at some peasant's house. But it was dangerous because the fascists would come and get you. So we arrived at Corniglio and we met this lady who was sitting outside her house knitting. We asked her: "Lady, we're looking for partisans, the rebels ..." Up there they didn't even know who the partisans were and we didn't have a proper term for them, either. So she said: "Look, there is a house there, there is a man with some people, I don't know what they're doing, I don't know if they're workers or somebody else. If you want to go up and have a look ..."

So we went to see and in fact it was a group of rebels led by that man. We said we wanted to join them and they welcomed us. "If you want to come out on patrol with us, otherwise you can wait here". We said: "No, we want to come". So we did, one group here, one group there. When we came back we went to this barn, which was transformed into a hideout, and there were butter and cheese and a lot of great stuff. One woman was making tagliatelle for the whole team. Wonderful! We were not even used to eat this dish at our own homes! After lunch, when we came back, the head of our team told us: "Go to the houses where the ladies are and invite them here so we can dance and have a chat". And so we did, and some girls came and we chatted and danced. We had radios so we had a fine time.

For 4-5 days everything went fine: we went out on patrol and came back around noon. One day our corporal asked us if we were fine. I told him I was perfectly fine but my colleague Pancio, who was sitting next to me, said: "No, if I find Communist partisans I will join them." I hit him with the elbow and then we went home and later the corporal went to talk to our boss, telling him our intentions. He came to us and said: "Go to the boss ..." I told him: "Armando, we had a hard time finding them and now we've found them and are doing fine, we have to eat and have fun, how can you say something like this?" And in fact we walked in and our boss said: "Hey you, you'd better stay in your area because we don't even have weapons, so you'd rather go to the area of Succiso, there are partisans there".

And so we kept going. I had this discussion with Pancio, I told him "Come on, were so lucky and now we're here in misery ...". "You'll see that now ..." Well, we went on slowly, slowly, and they didn't even give us anything for lunch. We went on walking towards our areas and we arrived

around 10-11 am. It was a bad day, it was raining and we kept discussing about the fact that we were still there at the starting point. We reached a point where people were throwing garbage in a hole, and we guessed that there must be a village nearby. I looked into the hole and saw a sort of Alpino-hat in the garbage. It was one of those hats that the Balilla were using, the avanguardists (fascist youth), they had a hat like the ones the Alpini used. So I went down and got the hat, cleaned it a bit and put it on my head. In this manner we reached Succiso.

In the outskirts of the town there were a few women but in the town centre there was nobody. Everyone had left! I went into the tavern of Torri and asked if there were partisans here. He said: "No, there are no partisan round here, nobody." "But I saw a few women ... " "They went to buy food". So we decided to stay for a while, waiting for someone to come, but no-one appeared. It was like a desert even though it was a village. So we sat down under a poplar and said "Let's talk. We don't have any money, it's raining, we don't know where the partisans are, they don't tell us anything here, what shall we do? Shall we go home? But we can't go home any more ..." He tried to calm me, he was older than me (he was born in 1924, I in 1926). But eventually I took my ID-card out of my wallet, I looked at him and told him: "Look, all our will to find the rebels is this". And I tore the ID in pieces. He asked me why I had done so and I told him: "What do you think we're going to do back home, show that we still have our ID? They already know that we went for a walk to see how it is". And then I leaned against the poplar and cried, I was like a two-year-old child. The whole day was like that. We didn't even have the money to go and buy something, but there was nothing to buy, anyway. In the evening we saw a guy coming towards us. He was the one that had brought us the radio, he was from Gavasseto. He recognised me and said: "Are you the guy from Magnani? You came to install my radio, remember, I live in Gavasseto ..." "Yes, I remember". So we loaded up all the stuff and went. The partisans were staying at Capanne di Succiso.

After lunch they divided into groups and me and my friend Pancio found ourselves in different groups. I asked him "Where are you going?" "They put me here, you're going with the Cervi group". I told him I wanted to stay together with him, we were like brothers, we couldn't stay in different groups with people we hardly knew. Sbafi was the commander and Mario was the commissioner. So I went to them and said: "Look, we are like brothers, you can't divide us". And they said "Ok, no problem, where do you want to go?" I said "It doesn't matter, either of the two will do as long as we are together". So they put us together in the Cervi group and before evening they came and told us: "Now you go up the the Cerreto-pass to blockthe street".

Clip 4

The Legoreccio massacre

So we went up to the Cerreto pass to block the street because the traffic was becoming intense there and the Germans were starting to annoy us. From Aulla all the way up to Castelnovo Monti a lot of Germans were passing through with tanks and cars. So we decided to disturb them because this was an area quite dangerous for us. We were supposed to change the shift every week but we stayed up there for more than three weeks and no-one came to take over our position.

We were living in the woods there, with no safe place to go. The patrol was constantly on alert because the Germans wouldn't let us in peace there. So we complained to our commander, asking to have a change because we were all beginning to get sick. At the beginning of September it started to get foggy up there and in October the snow began to fall, so sleeping in the woods and patrol all day was not nice at all.

After our complaint the Piccinini group came to relieve us, it was led by commander Jack. I had the flu and was ordered to go to my group, but I had lost my track.. They were supposed to be next to Legoreccio, a quiet and safe area, they went there to have a rest. When I and another colleague arrived there they had left to Parma. Since we couldn't find our detachment we decided to

look for the nearest detachment, called the "Anti-fascist".

So we stayed with them until our detachment, the "Cervi", came back, and then we would have talked about it. It was a nice group, I made some friends there, we were all getting along very well. When our group came back I told Pancio, who by that time had adopted this nickname, that I would like to stay in the Anti-Fascist group because we were doing fine there. We were starving in the other group but here they had food.. And it was a richer area, there were peasants whereas there only woods and nothing else existed. And he said: "No, I'm fine in my group, we'll talk about it". But we didn't talk anymore and then the massacre happened, they were all killed. They got surrounded and surrendered but were all killed. We were very disappointed by then, Our spirits were really low and we had only negative perspectives.

When the commemoration here will be held on the 17th, or on the 21st because it's always being celebrated on Sundays, I will go and take a look at the Cervidetachment. I can always say I was lucky because two or three times it was a coincidence and I always was lucky.

Clip 5

Bruna and the fleet

Bruna is one of the "staffette" (partisan couriers) who helped to save me. We were to meet between Barco, Bibbiano, Montecchio and Cavriago, where the railroad was, around midnight. We arrived at eleven o'clock, so we told the "staffetta" that we would go to a peasant's house nearby, and asked her to watch out and to call us when they'd arrived but to be careful. Around midnight she came to us and told us they'd arrived but they were dressed in white. They didn't know the password. We went to the entrance door and there they were, a group of 20 people all set there in front of us.

When they understood that we were inside the stable they shouted at us to come out with our hands up. Our light was burning, and one of them broke the lamp and shot at us in the darkness. They killed two cows and a donkey. One of us had taken his shoes off and ran away barefoot. We escaped to the other side of the door because we were surrounded on this side; an iron door, that door was never opened before. Then with three or four hits we managed to force it. Then one by one outside while they were shooting, but they were shooting at the cows and we were doing it on time. I lost track of the others, there was a hen-house but they weren't there. I went around the house but it was the wrong direction, I went out on the street and all of a sudden I heard somebody saying: "Come here with your hands up!" I shot at him and went hiding in the hen-house and from there into a ditch. I saw the road going down towards the cemetery. I walked inside the ditch filled with water in order not to leave tracks in the snow. I couldn't see the rest of my group anymore. So I walked on in this ditch and then into another ditch. In the meantime I heard the Germans were gathering, I could hear their horses. I went to the left, I went to the right right and eventually stopped where I was. I sat down near an elm and heard the belltower of Barco. It was one o'clock, half past one, two o'clock. With the dawning daylight I saw there was a house nearby and went there.

There were no watchdogs, so I went to the window of the house and saw an old lady with a stick lighting the fire. I looked around and slowly slowly ... At that time the peasants did not lock their doors as they do today, they left the door open to go to the stable. I knocked at the door and called: "Grandma! Grandma!" When she saw me she got scared and fell off the chair she was sitting on. I tried to pick her up and the daughter came down asking what was going on. I said: "Nothing, nothing". She said: "We heard shooting, we heard noises, what's going on?"

"Nothing, now, we'll take care of your grandma and then we'll see." I had long hair and a long beard, I was wet from head to toes, my clothes were freezing because I'd stayed outside in the cold all night. We took care of the grandma and then her husband came down and we talked, and I said: "Look, if I came here into your house I'm a sympathizer and nothing happens to you and we're all fine, but if you have some stories you come before me ... " And he said: "No, no, I'm a sympathizer,

too, I'm one that ..." "There's nothing bad, we'll fix it all". So we had a chat and I asked "Do you know Bruna?" Bruna was the "staffetta" from Cavriago, a few days later they caught her and tortured her, they did all sort of thing to her ... So they offered to hide me in the barn. They gave me some dry clothes and brought me to the hiding place. To that time the hiding places were in the middle of the fields. And then they went to Cavriago to call Bruna. As I saw her I was so glad, she told me that by nine they would come and pick me up. So they did, I met them on the street and we went to Gombio where my company was stationed. I had a girlfriend there and I went to the barn because I knew that when she was coming down she was going there. When she saw me she said: "Volpe! Volpe!" and we hugged and she told me "There were rumours that they'd caught you, that they'd killed you ..." but everything went fine and we're here.

Clip 6

Nickname (battle name)

We chose nicknames in the Anti-Fascist detachment. In the Cervi detachment, noone ever took our data, they didn't ask us anything, whereas here they wanted to know name and nickname. There were three of us, we took also one from Puianello, he was working in the pasta factory Cuccolini. They told us to find a nickname and Pancio said: "I want to have the name of a fighter: Pancio!" I told him: "Pancio was a fighter, from South America, what's his name ..." I wanted to have a more subtle name. So the other one said: "I want to be called Viper". "Why viper?" "Because it's scary". So I chose Volpe (fox). A fox runs fast and if there's danger it runs and saves itself. That's the story of the nickname Volpe. Another reason was that I thought that there must have been only few people called Volpe. In fact there was a Volpa in the Rosselli detachment but my name was Volpe, and that it stayed. Some changed their nickname from one place to another, not so in my case, I was fine with it and always kept this name. I'd chosen it because of the speed of the fox, an animal that runs fast. That was the reason for the name Volpe, my one and only name.

Clip 7

Crossing the river Enza

Two days before crossing the Enza river the commander of the battalion, called Cicci, came to us and said: "Guys, we thought it was the usual action of the Germans and the Fascists but this time it's a roundup, a sweep on a large scale that goes from Ciano to Casina, to Castelnovo Monti, all the way up to Vetto. The whole area is being closed up and they're trying to get us by encircling us". So it was decided to protect all the partisans in the Vetto-Rosano area and to bring us down to the Enza river so at night we crossed the river. At night the commander told us: "Now we have to set up a really safe guard because the Germans are everywhere. You can see them, so keep your eyes open and be careful because if we happen to do something or to kill a German they're going to burn down the entire village".

So at 3 a.m. we were ordered to move because by that time there were no partisans around, so we were the last lines moving and could be calm. They'd told us that the streets were clear, so we started walking. We were looking left and right, there was only fog. So we went into the Enza river and there was not even a small stick where we could have hidden if the fog lifted. Mirco had a big man in his team and he told me to give him a person that could go with him to his place to get a rope for crossing the river because the water was high. So they came back with the rope and we tied one end to the big rocks on one shore and the other end to the saddle of a little white horse that we had. The horse was very skinny and was standing just because it had four legs.

We crossed the river walking in the water and holding the rope. We had water up to our shoulders, I was holding my machine gun on one side and the rope on the other side. Mirko and the big man, Giovannone, that was the name we were calling him, went first and then told us to do the same.

I was one of the first ones to cross the river and as some of us were through, all of a sudden the fog lifted. It seemed to be done on purpose: all of a sudden you could see the street all the way up to Vetto. There were some Germans and when they saw us they started to shoot at us, we could hear the bullets whistle into the water, it was terrible. On the other shore there were the partisans from Parma and when they heard the Germans starting to shoot at us, they started to shoot at us, too. We shouted at them not to shoot, that we were partisans just like them. These donkies! A few days ago I told them again, as we remembered those events, because they killed four partisans. The partisans kept going despite the shooting because there was no other way: being shot by the Germans or drown in the water. So we passed and as we reached the other shore I talked to the commander and told him they were donkies but he said he'd mistaken us for Germans. I asked: "Do you think the Germans come passing the river together with us?" After these events we went our way and they went their way. Partisans kept crossing the river there despite the shooting because there was no other way: being killed by the Germans or drown. We reached Monte Caio. It was raining, and the more we walked up the more the rain turned into snow. On Monte Caio there was a crest we couldn't cross, so we decided to sleep up there where the Germans couldn't see us. The next morning we shook the snow off and went on up until Monte Penice, near Piacenza. If you look where Monte Penice is ... And then we went back.

Clip 8

Discipline

Talking about discipline, once my tooth was aching and so I looked for a dentist. We were in Cerreto Alpi to that time. The dentist told me: "I don't have the tool for pulling your tooth". I was in serious pain, I couldn't sleep nor eat, so I told him: "Now I go and get this tool and then I'll let you come and pull the tooth". To kill the pain the dentist told me to go and get a potato from some peasant in town, grate it and put it onto the hurting tooth. So before night shift I did this, I bound a tissue around my face and placed myself not right on the street but near it, so that I could see who was coming and going. So while I was sitting there I started to think about my youth, my family that I'd left, about this and that. The potato must have worked, I'd felt bad for some days because of the pain and so I fell asleep. There was the commander of the "Cervi" group, Arturo Trambuzzi, there was Trolli that had come for a meeting, there were a few other heads of unit, they went to the hotel that was near the Cerreto pass. After they'd ended the meeting they went down to the detachment where I was and I must have been sleeping quite heavily because I didn't hear them. So they started to shout: "Where is the sentinel? Where is the sentinel? Isn't there supposed to be a sentinel here? Why is noone here? Is this an area you can leave without a sentinel?" So I went there and said: "It's me, I'm here. My tooth aches ..." "Ok", they said, "let's talk about it tomorrow". On the next day there was a big meeting at the Gabellina restaurant to decide on my punishment. I should have said that because of the tooth pain I didn't feel comfortable with doing a night shift, but the discipline we'd been taught was stronger, I just wasn't able to go to one of my comrades and ask him for a change. It was my turn and I had to do it. So I was sentenced to do one extra day-shift. They cleaned a plant where we were staying because even there we had to be very careful, make no noise, because we could see the street but they could also hear someone speaking there. Well, I did my extra shift and at night everybody was making fun of me. Everybody was laughing because falling asleep in such a dangerous place was really something ... I remembered this episode well and the next times when we had to decide the shifts I didn't accept to do shifts that I didn't feel comfortable with, I didn't want to make a fool of myself once more. When you were on sentinel or on patrol you were supposed to do what had to be done and guarantee safety to the detachment.

Clip 9

Liberation

April was a boring month. Every evening we went to hear Radio London but all we could say was that we were still patrolling because we were not ready yet for the big push forward. When the big boss of the battalion came home he told us: "Guys, get prepared because tomorrow we're leaving!" "What? What does this mean? Where are we going?"

"Tomorrow morning we're going down, to Reggio".

"Oh, come on!"

"Yes, by now everyone is moving. Tomorrow morning the whole battalion and our brigade has to move down to Ciano".

I couldn't sleep that night, the perspective of going down was such an emotional thing that ...

We reached Ciano very slowly because we knew that there were the anti-rebels looking for us, ready to shoot at us from every window.

We reached Ciano without shooting. It was a complete desert, we didn't even meet any local person on the street. Since in Ciano there was nothing we decided to go further on to the crossroads to San Polo. We were walking slowly, keeping 10 meters distance between each of us because it was dangerous. So we reached the church. We were there, chatting, all the machine guns ready and all of a sudden an armoured car turned up. We thought it was the Germans and got ready to shoot but it was a car driven by a black man, smoking a long cigar. They recognized us as partisans so they came to us and we hugged. That guy was from Brazil and as he came to us he threw the cigar away. As I saw it I ran to the cigar, put it out and put it in my pocket. But the guy saw what I was doing and gave me a new one to smoke. To that time we were smoking leaves from nut- and cherry-trees. They gave us some chocolate and asked us how we were doing, they spoke Italian. We stayed there all night and the next morning the order came to go and occupy the village of Bibbiano. We would have preferred to go to Quattro Castella because that was in the direction of Reggio Emilia. But we went to Bibbiano. We arrived in the morning, walking slowly, and there was no one. So we set up another temporary post, and all of a sudden from behind the trees the Germans started to come out, with their hands up. There was a German behind every tree. They were probably hiding there since the evening before, when all of the others had escaped. So we gathered them and put them into the schools. Falco told me there was an order to go to Parma but I told him: "I'm not going to Parma, I'm going to defend Reggio Emilia, not Parma!" I hated the partisans of Parma because they had shot at us on October 6th, we have never been brothers with the partisans of Parma.

But there was nothing to do: self-discipline. The order was to be respected. We walked in line, slowly, looking at the beautiful landscape. Everything was clean, clean, clean, there was neither a fascist nor a German, nothing. We didn't fire one single shot. At the outskirts of Parma they told us that there were snipers and to be careful. As we were there, a jeep of Americans came from the direction of Reggio Emilia. We shouted at them to stop and told them that there was a group of Germans there who were annoying us. So one of them turned around, set the firegun in place, pointed at where we'd told him, put the bomb into the mortar and after the "cim cim tac" they'd disappeared, we didn't hear anyone any longer.

He must have hit them. So we came out and there was nothing left. We said goodbye to the Americans and went back to Reggio Emilia where we arrived at midnight. We put our stuff down and after a while a guy came in and told us there was someone looking for Francesco. I went out and it was my father. We had never coped well because he was very strict but then we hugged. He had looked for me a lot, he told me. They told him I was there but he believed they were saying so because I was dead. "Come on, we're here, let's go!" and then he said: "Now I'm going home, I tell your relatives and then you come home and eat with us". Yes, sure, eating with them, they didn't even have food to eat for themselves! Anyway, I left my father and the head of my unit, Falco, told me: "Get three or four men and go on patrol on the Via Emilia". I went to talk also to my boss

because I cared for him, too, and he said "Oh, Francesco!" and we hugged here and hugged there. After a few minutes he said: "Well, now we have to find a job because ..." "Ok, I'm going to make the discharge and I'll be back". And so I did. After the discharge, the next morning, I went to the shop and so we started a whole new life.

Clip 10

After the war

That day, I think it was May 3rd, we made the parade and then we went to the square. We had to turn over our weapons but, I tell you the truth, this was kind of hard for me. It was a nice Stan, shiny and clean, I had taken care for it like a brother because by doing so, you were said everything, no need to talk much. But I gave it back gladly, also because I wanted to forget that period. It was a spontaneous initiative to send the Fascists away, rather than the Germans, but that was finished now. And in fact after I went to work I only had in mind to party and to dance, because we had girls and we went here and there, but ... They called me to the Section for the meetings every now and then, later, but to tell you the truth, I didn't care any longer. I didn't go to the meetings any more. So I started working slowly, slowly, but I already had in mind to do things my way. We went dancing all around, to Puianello, to Codemondo, to the Plains, we came back at 2 or 3 at night. My dad once said to me: "The night clubs shut down at midnight, where are you staying until 3 o'clock?"

We wanted to have fun because we'd had such a hard time before, when we only talked about war. In my detachment I was the singer and they always asked me to sing this song or that one, but every time I got sad. Sonow I only wanted to enjoy myself. Then I found a girlfriend, a cousin of that friend of mine who had died. In fact I was matched with her because she was coming to meet me and asked me to take her out to dance. She was living in Puianello and I was staying in Reggio and at night she was going to sleep at Pancio's place. But when something isn't spontaneous it's not going on and in fact it was a bluff and we split up. Then I found my wife, because this time I went to find her. I was going to the Zibordi and as I saw her trac! I went to find her and it was a wholly different story. And here we are now. I've given a lot, also as a volunteer for the ANPI. I did it with my heart because it wasn't something that was ordered to me. It was my initiative because I thought that the partisans were fighting for a right cause.